

“Divorce”

Mark 10:2-12

2/14/99 – Philip Siddons

*“My father sits at night with no lights on
His cigarette glows in the dark
The living room is still
I walk by, no remark.*

*I tip toe past the master bedroom
Where my mother reads her magazines
I hear her call ‘sweet dreams.’
But I forget how to breathe.*

*But you say it’s time we moved in together
And raised a family of our own, you and me.
Well that’s the way I’ve always heard it should be
You want to marry me, we’ll marry.*

*My friends from college, they’re all married now.
They have their houses and their lives.
They have their silent Moons
Tearful nights, angry dawns.
Their children hate them for the things they’re not.
They hate themselves for what they are.
And yet they drink, they laugh.
Close the wound, hide the scar.*

*But you say it’s time we moved in together
And raised a family of our own, you and me
Well that’s the way I’ve always heard it should be
You want to marry me, we’ll marry.*

*You say that we can keep our love alive
Babe, all I know is what I see
The couples cling and claw
And drown in love’s debris
You say we’ll soar like two birds through the clouds
But soon you’ll cage me on your shelf
I’ll never learn to be just me first by myself*

*Well OK it’s time we moved in together
And raise a family of our own you and me
Well that’s the way I’ve always heard it should be
You want to marry me, we’ll marry.”¹*

¹ Carley Simon “That’s The Way I’ve Always Heard It Should Be.” This theme was also strongly restated in the movie “Reality Bites.”

We can hear and feel the sadness of the words and images of that old Carley Simon song. What’s so anguishing about this song is that it is reminiscing from the standpoint of a woman who remembers her childhood in a home where love was dead.

I’ve talked to single people through the years who take their best shot at the single world. Many work all day, take a nap early in the evening, and then begin the rounds at the bars and gathering places for singles. They hate the single’s bar scene yet because the loneliness is so excruciating, they’re hoping against hope that somehow — amidst all the game playing, all the phoniness, all the danger of being hurt — they’ll find someone who is willing to try to make it last.

In some contrast to Carley Simon’s piece, listen to the glimpses of hope in the song by the musical group named Rush.²

*“Like a million little doorways
All the choices we make.
All the stages we passed through
All the roles we played.*

*So many different directions
Our separate paths might have turned.
With every door that we opened
Every bridge that we burned.*

*Somehow we find each other
Through all that masquerade.
Somehow we found each other
Somehow we have stayed
In a state of grace.*

*Like a million little crossroads
Through the back streets of youth.
Each time we turn a new corner
A tiny moment of truth.*

*So many different connections
Our separate paths might have made.
With every door that we opened
Every game we played.*

² Ghost of a Chance by Rush, 1992

*Somehow we find each other
Though all that masquerade.
Somehow we found each other.
Somehow we have stayed
In a state of grace.*

*I don't believe in destiny
Or the guiding hand of fate.
I don't believe in forever
Or love as a mystical state.*

*I don't believe in the stars or the planets
Or angels watching from above.
But I believe there's a ghost of a chance
We can find someone to love
And make it last."*

I've lived in large cities and small towns between Chicago and Washington D.C. I've been fortunate enough to be able to travel and study in other countries — seeing different cultures. Along the way, through all of these varied and diverse experiences, I've gotten to know a couple of thousand people in my life time.

Like some of you, I've had significant emotional experiences and have faced death and disease scores of times with parishioners. But in all these experiences, besides the profound brevity of life, there is nothing that impresses me more than the agony of loneliness. The existential writers and philosophers talked about the human condition of aloneness with articulate passion. Broken relationships and an absence of relationship is at the heart of most songs, novels and movies we take in today. We were made for relationships.

You see a wheelchair-bound young man looking up and smiling at someone who has stopped to touch him and talk with him. You see a baby in the arms of her mother. You see teens holding hands as they walk down the sidewalk in your neighborhood. You see a young woman sitting alone in the corner restaurant. Every one of us has been made to be in relationship with other people.

We get our meaning in life from our friendships. In our relationships we get our sense of balance in life. When someone loves and accepts us, we do live in a state of grace — but when relationships fail, life seems barely worth living.

You'd think that the Church would be the best place someone could go to heal their emotional wounds. I hope this church is a healing experience for you. I hope that the forty-some percent of you who are single, separated, widowed or divorced in this congregation have found healing in this church. When our primary relationships fail or disappear, the church should be the most supportive place in our lives, but sometimes it is not the case and clergy have often been the cause for inflicting considerable pain.

Out of laziness and unwillingness to study the Biblical passages and their historical context, clergy people have wrenched the Bible teachings, about divorce, out of their first century context. They've thrown these harsh phrases from the Bible in the faces of people experiencing deep emotional pain. There may be some of you who have experienced the results of this insensitivity and laziness.

What I would like to do is attempt to trace the Biblical concept of divorce through the Bible and summarize, within the time constraints of this morning, what I believe is the context — and perhaps a more accurate understanding of what was going on then — before attempting to suggest some implications for us today. I am aware that many of you have more at stake in this topic than I do because of your experiences.³ This kind of study is hard work but perhaps some day, in the future, it will give you or a loved one some sense of healing.

In ancient Judaism women were owned as property by their fathers or husbands. They were the legal possessions of men. They had no legal or social rights and were denied the privilege of religious participation. Jewish women were prohibited from reading the scriptures, and except in a few rare cases, they were usually prohibited from learning to read. This is one reason the Mid-Eastern Muslim cultures are so threatened by our Western Values — because the equality of women with men here represents a total threat to their hierarchical male-controlled society.

Although there were some positive ideals set for marriage in Judaism, the fact was that there were

³ While I have stood beside many people as they've gone through divorce, I realize that I have not experienced what you've been through.

divorces in their culture. But the men could divorce their wives but not the other way around. Women simply did not have the right to divorce.

One of the positive things that was started early in Israelite history was the custom of a man giving his future father-in-law money — just in case he (the future son-in-law) died. In that event, the widow would have some money on which to live. This was obviously a life insurance policy. It was more than difficult for widows because there was no such thing as a job outside of the home to support one's self. Gradually this custom evolved into a pre-marriage contract called the "Kethubah."⁴

Moses was said to be the one who initiated the procedure of divorce. The reason he did it was to make sure that the woman received her money, as well as a piece of paper clearly stating that she was divorced and could remarry. A "writ of divorce" was a positive step for the sake of women who would otherwise be left in a hopeless economic state.

The Jewish legislation regarding divorce is full of theological dispute. There were no clear grounds for a man divorcing his wife. It varied from synagogue to synagogue, from rabbi to rabbi. What seemed to emerge, however, was a powerlessness for women because the grounds for divorce were based on a woman's having transgressed the law of Moses or Jewish customs.

Grounds for divorce were based on the male rabbis' interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4. The passage says that if a husband finds some "indecent" in his wife, he could divorce her.

Although there were some rules enacted to force men to marry women they raped, the overall assumption, in all of the legislation, was that women were more corrupt than men. In the book of Numbers, chapter five, is the "Water of Bitterness" test. It is a ceremony of humiliation for women suspected of being unfaithful — but never would this horrible experience be forced upon a man.⁵ A double standard existed.

⁴ It was a financial agreement whereby the wife would receive a certain amount of money in the event of her husband's death or divorce.

⁵ Numbers 5:11-31. If you read it, you will recall the Salem Witch hunts that dunked women suspected of being a witch into water and if she drowned, she was innocent.

In summary, in the Old Testament times, men divorced their wives and the women had little say in the matter.

By the time of Christ, there were two rabbinical schools of thought about interpretations for divorce. As you remember, the rabbis gave their opinions on what should be considered "indecent" about a woman in order to grant a divorce.

One school of interpretation, headed by Rabbi Shammai, held that divorce was to be based only on sex offenses by the wife. In other words, he and his followers taught that only in the case of a woman being sexually unfaithful to her husband was she to be divorced.

The more liberal (and widely accepted) school of Rabbi Hillel interpreted the grounds for divorce to be just about anything a husband didn't like in his wife — or for even the slightest infraction of Jewish customs. For example: A woman could be divorced without financial support if she gave her husband food that had not been tithed — a portion going to the local rabbi. If she had sexual relations with her husband during menstruation or if she made a vow to God and didn't tell her husband — she could be divorced. She could be divorced if she went out of the house without a veil over her face.

One rabbi declared that if a husband saw someone else more attractive, he could divorce his wife. Rabbi Akabah said that if she spoiled a meal — that was grounds for divorce.⁶

This brings us to the text for this morning, where the Pharisees, who were rabbis, came up to Jesus in order to test Him in this controversial issue. "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" they asked.⁷

Jesus throws it right back to them, saying "What did Moses say?"⁸ After these rabbis carefully noted that Moses allowed divorce, Jesus tells them that it

⁶ Rabbi Akabah lived sometime after Jesus.

⁷ Matthew says the question was lengthier..."Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason."

⁸ Which was very clever because if the Pharisees disputed Moses, they would immediately come into conflict with the Priests and Sadducees who raised the first five books of the Old Testament over and above anything that rabbis (and other Old Testament writers) had pronounced. Now they were in the position of having to watch what they say.

was because of peoples' cruelty that divorce legislation came into being in the first place. In other words, somebody had to start protecting women from being dumped out in the street.

And then Jesus quotes from Genesis: "A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and they shall become one, no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined, let no one put asunder."

Jesus' basic teaching here is that compared to a person's relationship with their parents, their marriage is to be thought of as permanent and their parent-child relationship is only temporary. This statement upset some of the disciples and so they asked Him about it later, when they were away from the crowds.

This time Jesus spoke more forcefully: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her.⁹ If she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

By this time in the culture, because of the rising status of women in the surrounding Greco-Roman world, women were divorcing in some cases, although this was highly resisted in the male-dominated culture of Judaism. Jesus was clearly reacting to the current trend of men divorcing their wives quickly when He said "don't divorce and remarry or you'll be committing adultery." You can not wrench this statement out of the context to which Jesus was reacting.

But today many church leaders have skipped the historical context and have been stating that anytime someone gets a divorce and remarries another it is adultery. To my amazement, I have even heard of a case where a woman was told by her minister that she should probably free herself from her battering husband and get a divorce, but because of this passage, she should remain single and alone for the rest of her life.

The context — what was happening when those rabbis asked Jesus this question — was that they wanted Jesus to get ensnared with petty issues like whether or not a man could divorce his wife if she burned a meal or went outside without wearing her veil. So instead of taking issue with either the Hillel

⁹ Matthew adds: 'except for unchastity'

or Shammai schools of thought, Jesus was explaining the original purpose of marriage from Genesis. He taught that the obligations of a marriage relationship are extremely high.

The men listening to Jesus, two thousand years ago, were obviously impressed that women were to be treated not as material possessions but as partners — in a relationship that was to be more important than their relationship with their parents. Jesus' words here so impressed the disciples, according to Matthew's account, that they seriously asked themselves whether it might be better to remain unmarried — in light of the high reverence required from men and women in marriage.

What this conversation boils down to is this: Jesus was commenting on the fact that some people were divorcing their partners so they could marry someone else — showing little or no compassion for their partner. The image here is of someone quickly and thoughtlessly divorcing — just to marry someone else. The passage is clearly not saying all people of all times should never divorce and then remarry another person. That sort of interpretation is irresponsible and without integrity of scholarship or even common sense. Jesus was merely commenting on the quickie divorces of His time that only men could (and did) do to women in that very male-dominated Jewish segment of society.

The other major section in the New Testament about divorce comes from 1st Corinthians 7 where Paul is answering a written question from that congregation on the issue of divorce.

Some people in that new Christian congregation had some unusual ideas. Some thought that the kingdom of God was already here and some of them actually thought that anything goes. 'Who needs all these rules and regulations about marriage and other things if we are all supposed to be living in the new kingdom of God' — they suggested.

Some of them were acting like commitment didn't matter. After all, Jesus had said "there will be no giving or taking of marriage in heaven."

In that same church were others who were acting inappropriately in the other direction. These people wanted to act like monks and nuns and they thought that everyone should be celibate to remain chaste and pure in order to be more spiritual.

Paul had to tell this group, in the first five verses of first Corinthians 7, that it's OK to be married. It is a relationship of mutuality and sexuality is natural and right. In verse 7, Paul says that he is single and that he personally thinks it is an easier life — but if anyone can't handle being single, they should get married.

From verse 10 on, throughout the chapter, Paul suggests that if people are already married, they shouldn't separate from their spouse because of some distorted thinking that they're in some special new kingdom of God. And if, in the case where one has a non-Christian spouse, one shouldn't divorce their spouse. You never know whether or not that person will become a Christian through the influence of the believing spouse. Verse 16 says, "Wife, how do you know whether you will save your husband; husband, how do you know whether you will save your wife."

Now why were these people considering divorcing their spouses and asking Paul for his opinion? It was because they thought they were living in a "new age" where the rules had supposedly changed. Some of them actually thought they could live better Christian lives if they were celibate and didn't have their non-believing spouse around to spiritually contaminate them. It was a distorted thinking about the Christian life — on the part of these few people. It was starting to cause troubles in marriage relationships in that particular house church.

Toward the end of the chapter, Paul says that spouses are bound together as long as they live. In the event of death, one can remarry but Paul personally believed it would be better to remain single to avoid the hassles of married life.

Here Paul was conveying the permanent ideal concept of marriage that was originally envisioned by Genesis and mentioned by Jesus. Just as Jesus did, Paul was saying that the ideal of marriage is to stay together. In dealing with a group of people in a particular congregation (who were way off on a tangent in thinking about being celibate for Jesus) — Paul had to tell them not to divorce their spouses just because of a difference in their faith. So under no circumstances would it be credible to interpret Paul to be saying that once a person gets divorced they should never remarry. Instead, Paul was telling this

group to stay married because sometimes one spouse isn't a believer.

We can mention, in passing, that in 1st Timothy 3 — where the advice is for a church leader or elder to be "the husband of one wife" — it is merely an admonition not to elect elders who are polygamous — having a harem of wives (which was an accepted practice in the near east.) From a Biblical interpretation methodology, it is not credible to interpret this passage to mean that church elders cannot be divorced and remarried.

Today things are considerably different than in the first century Jewish culture. The status of women has advanced so that no longer are women being divorced for the kinds of reasons permitted in the first century Jewish culture. Instead, both women and men are exercising their choice to get themselves out of what they consider an oppressive marriage.

Today three out of five marriages end in divorce and it has been estimated that 4 out of 6 marriages are in serious trouble. It is true that many people don't have the basic commitment to one another to work through problems. In our society, there is virtually no stigma in most social circles to having gone through a divorce. The ideal of marriage being a relationship of mutuality and equality is not realized in many marriages. It takes a lot of hard work, personal maturity and grace to maintain a relationship of equality. That is the teaching of Ephesians 5 on the dynamic of marriage.

But life is not ideal — nor was it ever. Our experiences in life are not simple and moral choices are rarely black and white. The emotional and mental pain that occurs in some marriages is not merely a matter of someone not being spiritual enough. The way a person has been raised for years largely determines how they go about life — their values, their behavior patterns, their thoughts about roles in marriage, their self-concept and their personality and communication skills. Sometimes, for the sake of preserving one's personal dignity and basic worth as a person, it becomes necessary to escape from the agony and oppression that their marriage relationship has become. Ideally, as Jesus was saying, a couple should live permanently in harmony, but because of the brutality and ugliness in some relationships,

divorces have to take place in order for individuals to heal and grow to be all that they were meant to be.

I believe that our God is not a Being Who is hiding away in the cobwebs of heaven's library, in the law wing, all bogged down with these human laws and restrictions and paper work of formality and solemnization. The prophets throughout the Old Testament, the entire teachings of Jesus, and the new emphasis of the early church breaking away from the legalistic Judaism — all proclaim that our God is a personal God Who looks at our hearts. And no matter where we find ourselves in our life's experiences, God loves us and is near to us at every moment as we walk on the pathways through our lives.

For some of you, you may be nearing a divorce or you may already have gone through one. You're obviously not going to spend the rest of your life alone, but because of your divorce, you have experienced new beginnings.

Most of us have seen individuals get divorced and begin to flourish and blossom as a human being — just from being away from an oppressive marriage. We've seen how individuals have found happiness, wholeness and have come home to the beauty within them that they have always embodied. God is with us, in our new beginnings, and is with us after all of the pain of our past. Divorce is particularly tough on children in these transitions, but through the years I have become absolutely convinced that it is better to come from a broken home, than to be in one — experiencing all the ugliness and frayed ends of incompatibility.

I believe it is the task of the Christian Church to be an open and caring group of people — particularly for those who have gone through the ravages of divorce. No one really enjoys a divorce and it's about time for some clergy people to stop treating divorced people like little children who have misbehaved in some way. Just as one's family of origins can be an accepting and loving group of people for one experiencing divorce, those of us in the Church must embrace hurting individuals, with open arms, who are coming through the trauma of the economic, mental, spiritual, emotional and social devastation of divorce — to new beginnings in relationships.

As the Church, we've all got to explore how we can work toward the ideals mentioned in Scripture.

At the same time, we must work on healing in our times of brokenness and our far-from-ideal experiences.

Our responsibility as Christians, in the matter of divorce, is to try to bring healing to those experiencing it. We must help divorced people heal and help them discover that they are deeply loved by God and by us.

Try stepping out of tradition and including your single friends in your social activities in this very couples-oriented world. Try helping single people in economic matters — because court settlements are never fully fair to those who have invested all of their lives into raising and nurturing children. Divorce usually leaves people facing the new experience of living with considerably less money.

Sometimes the people who have the most pressing needs are the people near you. Those of us with two incomes, and a little more disposable income, should help single people financially. We must help in the mental and spiritual crisis that an individual faces as they are undergoing the drastic change of separating from a longtime partner and walking on uncertain paths ahead.

As a person in the position of being a counselor, in this community, I consider it a privilege and tremendous responsibility to help in any healing in your life — regardless of the difficulty you are experiencing. And I am firmly convinced that God will work all things out for good in the long run. Our fierce desire and quest for intimacy will continue, but I think there's more than a ghost of chance that you'll find someone and make it last. And if you don't — you've at least got us standing beside you. ■